

EDWARD PESSEN

Losing Our Souls

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The swiftest glance at recent events seems to establish that the United States successfully achieved the chief objectives of its cold war policy. The Soviet empire has crumbled. The Eastern European satellites have broken the shackles that bound them, achieving independence and installing—for the most part—representative democratic governments in place of their ousted Soviet puppet regimes. The former Soviet Union has withdrawn from Afghanistan, ceased intervening in Third World affairs, and cut off its financial and military aid to radical or Marxist regimes and movements. Marxism seems almost everywhere to be in retreat. And, most dramatic of all, the Communist party has not only been removed from power in what used to be the Soviet Union but it has in some places been outlawed. The Union of Soviet Socialist

Republics has ceased to exist, replaced by what at this writing is called a commonwealth composed of those former Soviet republics that chose to join it. Amidst the debris, the United States stands alone as the sole remaining superpower, clearly the victor over its twin enemies—the Soviet Union and Marxism-Leninism.

And yet questions about American cold war policy remain. That the United States achieved its major objectives does not prove that the policy and its goals were therefore in the national interest. Questionable ends do not become worthy because they are attained. As I shall show, American policy and the means of implementing it have had negative as well as positive consequences. . . .

The most baneful effect of this anti-Soviet policy [was] the unprecedented insecurity it brought to the United States. For the first time in the nation's history it could be almost destroyed and most of its people killed in a matter of minutes by weapons against which we had no effective defense. And it was our own doing that brought us to this condition. True, a massive nuclear arsenal would enable American leaders to wipe out any nation that attacked us. But the resulting mutual destruction would be of little comfort to the few irradiated survivors. . . . President John F. Kennedy at one point doubted that the expenditure of hundreds of billions of dollars on nuclear and conventional arms had increased U.S. security at all. In fact, the nuclear weapons buildup, and the Soviet buildup it evoked, seriously undermined our security. Many thousands of misreadings of radar and frightening superpower confrontations threatened nuclear holocaust, by accident or design. American leaders neither hoped nor planned for this state of affairs, but it might have been anticipated had they given more serious thought to the likely results of their nuclear policy.

Yet another consequence of official cold war policies was the great fear and anxiety that swept over the world at the dread of a nuclear holocaust. There is no way of measuring precisely the emotional pain suffered by a generation trained to "duck and cover," but there is no reason to doubt that nuclear nightmares left psychic scars in their wake.

The manufacture and above all the testing of nuclear bombs has had a deleterious and perhaps irreversible effect on the environment, poisoning the earth, the waters, the air, the atmosphere, and causing untold injury and death to plant, animal, and human life. We have not to this point learned how to dispose of nuclear wastes.

To those who would argue that nuclear bombs, however awful their effects, were simply the latest progression in the history of weapons development and therefore not chargeable to the cold war, evidence says otherwise. President Truman's use of the atomic bomb in adopting a tougher stance toward the Soviets, and our questionable plan for control of atomic weapons, proposed to the United Nations, indicates that we aggressively seized this new weapon for policy ends.



Morally questionable presidential actions to implement their cold war policy, including an ardor for nuclear bombs, destruction of Vietnam, and the CIA's less than secret involvement in the assassination of foreign leaders, aroused strong anti-American feeling in many countries of the world. Senator Frank Church believed that the CIA's covert operations had "destroyed the moral leadership of [the United States] throughout the world. . . . Resistance, hostility, and hatred toward the United States—much of it stems from our covert operations."

Most satisfactory to the United States in international affairs was the collapse of the Soviet Union. Responding to what he felt was the excessive self-praise of President George Bush in claiming credit for bringing about the demise of the USSR, George Kennan has argued that the Soviet implosion was due to internal strains and weaknesses that had been developing over time in that vast and complex nation. Yet it seems beyond doubt that American post-World War II

actions played an important role in hastening the dissolution of the Soviet order and the fall of the Communist party both in the USSR itself and in the satellite states of Eastern Europe. The amazing inefficiency and backwardness of an economy bypassed by the technological revolutions of the postwar decades were of course instrumental in undermining the Soviet Union. But the great economic strain imposed on the Soviets by an arms race that we promoted, the havoc that American-sponsored covert operations spread throughout the Soviet empire, the cold war tensions that induced the Soviet government to tighten already onerous internal controls and restraints—all contributed to the fall of the Marxist-Leninist state.

Yet these policies also accounted for at least three million Asian deaths in Southeast Asia, the wounding of millions more, the destruction of much of the Korean countryside, and the utter devastation of Vietnam, on which more bombs were dropped than on all the belligerents combined in World War II. In Korea and in Southeast Asia, American leaders made war on nations that had neither attacked nor threatened to attack the United States. Absent the cold war and absent a theory that political victories for Communist or communist-supported parties anywhere were Soviet-directed and therefore unacceptable to the United States, there would not have been wars in Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Reliance on carpet bombing, napalm, Agent Orange, search-and-destroy missions, body counts, and Operation Phoenix, which killed many thousands of unarmed "communist suspects" in a war Presidents Johnson and Nixon chose to wage, were the assured results of these very tactics.

Bloodbaths in Indonesia, the Congo . . . , Angola, Iran, Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile, Brazil, and Argentina; the killing of hundreds of thousands of peasants, students, trade unionists, priests, and nuns; the wiping out of entire villages by right-wing governments, police forces, militias, secretive death squads, many of them financed and trained by and in the United States—these were other consequences of our cold war policy. A cynical Latin American noted that they had been "killing 'communists' there for centuries." American policymakers approved such executions, insisting however that they not be publicized. In Guatemala, for example, after the CIA had helped overthrow the government of Arbenz Guzman, when anti-communist Colonel Enrique Diaz balked at enforcing the American ambassador's order to kill the communist suspects on his proscription list, Diaz was quickly dumped and replaced by a more cooperative officer.

Many noncommunist Third World governments were overthrown as a result of cold war policy, and in some cases their leaders were assassinated. Among the victims were Mossadegh in Iran, Arbenz Guzman in Guatemala, Lumumba in the Congo, Diem in South Vietnam, Allende in Chile, and Sukarno in Indonesia. Castro of Cuba was not among their number, but not for want of American efforts. American leaders also promoted the civil wars that during the era plagued the Philippines, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Angola, and Peru. In Central America and elsewhere in the Third World, brutal dictatorships that came to power commanded the support of native oligarchs, large American corporations, and an American government that in many instances instructed the despots in torture and terror. The shah's notorious SAVAK which terrorized post-Mossadegh Iran, was the beneficiary of such American assistance.

In an address he gave at the University of Pennsylvania in 1962, historian Arnold Toynbee likened the United States to Rome in the days of empire, everywhere the champion of the rich against the poor and the enemy of popular revolutions. Invariably American policies supported wealthy oligarchs against the peasant masses from whose ranks, after all, came communist "suspects," thus doing the bidding of such corporations as the United Fruit Company, which profited mightily from its vast landholdings and the low wages it paid peasant labor in the Central

American banana republics it dominated. We resisted reforms that threatened the profit margins of American investors in the Third World, acquiesced in the heroic looting of the national treasury of Zaire by despot Joseph Mobutu, and poured arms and financial aid into countries ruled by our favored elites rather than assisting the beleaguered poor. In all these ways American policies helped perpetuate the poverty and inequality that reigned in the nonindustrial world. . . .

The earth's surface was pockmarked with American air bases, war planes armed with hydrogen bombs, and the military personnel called for by the treaties and alliances the United States entered into with nations on almost every continent. Since these agreements were designed to meet "indirect aggression" and internal subversion as well as to confront the Soviet Union or, as in Asia, Red China, one of their not insignificant effects was to prevent change in the status quo or, in exceptional cases like the Dominican Republic, the accession to power of democratically elected governments.

Our cold war leaders brushed aside international law and traditional restraints on the use of force against nations with which we were at peace. The United States intervened in the affairs of other countries, resorting to sabotage, demolition, assassination, and out-and-out warfare. The Founders of the nation had regarded war as a barbaric institution, to be entered into only in case of an attack or threatened attack on our country. When he became secretary of state, Daniel Webster expressed the hope that the War of 1812 would be our last war. War, he observed, should be rejected as an instrument of national policy because "the spirit of the age . . . demanded that civilized nations settle their differences by conciliation [and] moral precept rather than by narrow advantage." But during the cold war our leaders became as children of Clausewitz, willing to embrace war as a perfectly acceptable means of conducting foreign policy. . . .

Patriotism has come to be widely misdefined in the wake of the cold war. The dictionary defines it as love of country. As the generation of Washington, Jefferson, and the Adamses knew, love of country is not synonymous with love of government. When government misbehaves or pursues bad policy, "real" patriotism takes the form of open criticism of the government's actions, no matter how risky or harmful such criticism may be to one's reputation. Courage may be required of real patriots because government's power to shape public opinion is so great that it can transmute stupid into seemingly wise policy and stigmatize criticism of policy as unpatriotic if not treasonable. Cold war America . . . treated patriotism as a kind of blind, Ramboesque nationalism, according to which patriots offer uncritical, even enthusiastic approval of government actions against foreign states, no matter how illegal, cruel, and amoral the actions.

The American way of life, whose defense against communist subversion spiced so much cold war rhetoric, [took] on new meaning. In fact the concept is broad and inclusive, for it describes a complex and often discordant reality. But during the cold war it was stripped of the irreverence, the suspicion of business and ill-gotten gains, the pacifism, the sharp dissent, the sympathy for foreign revolutions that had come to be an important part of the American tradition.

The American people . . . acquiesced in the remarkably arrogant behavior of its government during the cold war. While the details of most clandestine activities were kept from public view, the broad outlines of many covert operations were known. Nor did the media and the public question whether the CIA or other government officials were involved in publicized coups or assassinations of foreign leaders. Nor were complaints heard about the tendency of presidents to resort to force on their exclusive authority in defense of what they called our vital interests. In effect, Congress's power to declare war was set in abeyance.

These interests [were] ever more elastically defined during the cold war and in its aftermath. Time was when, in accord with the principles admired by our Founding Fathers, our vital interests were peace, security against foreign invasion, and a prosperity that was most surely achievable through trade and commerce on equal terms with all willing nations. No longer. America's cold war leaders acted on the unspoken premise that the struggle against communist subversion somehow created an imposing new catalogue of interests so important as to justify illegal actions in order to safeguard and secure them. These allegedly vital interests required us to prevent a number of unacceptable circumstances: elected procommunist or insufficiently anti-communist regimes; the toppling of pro-American governments, no matter how undemocratic and repressive; the loss or unavailability to us of foreign resources which we had grown accus-

tomed to having on our own terms; the emergence anywhere of political movements our leaders adjudged as hostile or threatening.

Almost all shades of influential American opinion in and out of government have come to regard U.S. accessibility to Middle Eastern oil, under terms to which we have become accustomed, as an American interest so vital that war would be justified in order to maintain it. We are saying in effect that we will not permit a foreign people to take control of their own resources if the United States has come to depend on getting those resources under terms of our choosing, and if we have reason to fear that the new regime may change these terms or, worse, shut off the supply. So bizarre a notion goes largely unremarked in the contemporary United States. Under international law a nation does have the right, after all, to do what it will with its own products and natural resources, no matter how much these goods are coveted by any other nation. Pursuing the cold war has evidently accustomed American leaders and the public alike to feel that whatever Uncle Sam wants anywhere on earth, Uncle Sam has the right to get, and by whatever means he thinks necessary.

Rossinow, Doug and Rebecca Lowen, Ed. *The United States Since 1945: Historical Interpretations*.
Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2007.

Name: _____

Questions – Losing Our Souls

1. List three accomplishments, according to the author of Cold War policy by the United States.

1.

2.

3.

2. List 5 different ways that the author claims that the United States and the world were negatively affected by the Cold War.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

(2 sided)



3. Explain how the author claims that patriotism was widely “misdefined” during the Cold War.

4. Explain why you agree or disagree with this claim.

5. What is the author’s overall argument about how fighting the Cold War transformed the United States? (See the very last paragraph)



6. Explain why you agree or disagree with this argument.

